



NATIONAL HEALTH COUNCIL



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Building the Case

Promoting Health Literacy Within the Ranks

Welcome to the first issue of *Health Literacy Toolbox*. This newsletter has two central goals.

- First, to provide information that helps groups address the impact of low health literacy.
- Second, to model design and writing that are easy to read. Here, we are aiming for a ninth-grade reading level.

In this issue, we focus on building the case for health literacy. Many people are not aware of the big impact of low health literacy. Your group might need to build its case with staff, chapters and others.

What is Health Literacy?

Health literacy refers to a person's ability to understand health information and take proper action. Several factors affect a person's health literacy, including:

- reading level
- cultural background
- education
- age
- attitude about receiving health information.

Together, these factors influence the way people comprehend health guidelines. They also affect the choices made in response to those guidelines.

Why is Health Literacy Important?

Low health literacy bears a huge financial and human cost. Tens of millions of people living in our country have poor reading skills. Patients from all walks of life wind up with flawed care because of reading problems. Those most likely to be hurt by low health literacy include the elderly, non-whites and people with low incomes.

Estimates of costs tied to low health literacy vary from \$30 to \$72 billion a year. Medicare and Medicaid jointly pay about two-thirds of the cost.

Simply put, health groups can better serve consumers by making information easy to read. You'll also help stretch treatment dollars.

“To address health literacy, you must be very sensitive to your target audiences.” Betsy van Die, Director of Media Relations, Prevent Blindness America



Prevent Blindness America Puts Health Literacy Front and Center

In 2002, Daniel Garrett, senior vice president at Prevent Blindness America (PBA), attended a workshop about health literacy. He describes the event as a “watershed moment.” He had been skeptical. But he saw that health literacy was critical to his group’s mission. “I was blown away,” says Garrett.

Garrett and other PBA staff first learned about the issue from their affiliate in Georgia. In turn, PBA took the concept to other affiliates around the country. The group also earned the support of its medical advisor and board. (See “Four Steps to Building the Case.”)

“We’ve redone dozens of brochures and fact sheets,” explains Ken West, PBA’s director of marketing communications. The work took place over more than a year. “We’ve built the case through example. We provided our affiliates with materials that speak directly to patients. The response has been very good.”

For Prevent Blindness America, health literacy is mission critical.

Betsy van Die, PBA’s director of media relations, helped redesign the group’s materials as well. Van Die finds that the new materials are effective with the media as well as consumers. Is it hard to adopt easy-to-read guidelines? “Once you get used to it,” says van Die, “it becomes second nature.”



Four Steps to Building the Case

Prevent Blindness America was lucky to have the early support of its medical advisor and board of directors. But Ken West at PBA still had to earn this support. Here’s what he did.

- **Created Sample Brochures**—Ken West created materials that were easy to read. These samples showed the benefits of health literacy guidelines.
- **Shared Samples with Medical Advisor**—When Ken West approached his group’s medical advisor, he had more than a concept to share. He built the case with his samples.
- **Built on Medical Advisor’s Support**—Dr. Maurice Rabb, PBA’s medical advisor, did more than approve Ken West’s work. He made a presentation to the group’s board about the need to address health literacy.
- **Followed Up with Medical Reviewers**—Ken West wrote to the health professionals who review PBA’s materials for medical accuracy. He told them that Dr. Rabb endorsed the effort to make brochures more accessible. Reviewers now understand that patient materials must be easy to read.



NMHA Brings Health Literacy Principles to Affiliates

When James Radack learned about health literacy, he saw that it applied to the goals of the National Mental Health Association (NMHA). As the group's vice president of public education, Radack works to overcome the social shame attached to mental illness. "This stigma is greater among audiences with low health literacy," explains Radack. "We can better address both stigma and illness with clear, simple pieces."

Testing, Testing

To become strong advocates for health literacy, Radack and others at NMHA first educated themselves. They attended workshops and researched the issue.



One of NMHA's first efforts at health literacy was the development of a plain language brochure about depression. They hired a health literacy expert to assist with the piece.

"By offering help to your colleagues and members on health literacy, you can really move your mission forward." James Radack,

Vice President for Public Education, National Mental Health Association

NMHA usually tests new programs with a few affiliates before a wide rollout. They did just that with the new depression brochure. "The piece received a very positive response," says Radack. This support helped him build the case for health literacy to a broader affiliate audience.

Training Affiliate Leaders

In January 2004, nearly 40 NMHA leaders from around the country attended a workshop on health literacy. Health literacy expert Wendy Mettger led the session. She shared tactics that could easily be implemented. Health literacy will also be on the agenda at NMHA's Annual Conference in June.

Offering Resources and Counsel

Radack knows that training is just one piece of the puzzle. NMHA has also placed resources on its internal affiliate website. He also makes himself available to review materials created by his affiliates.

Nuts and Bolts

Tips to Build the Case for Health Literacy

- **Educate Yourself**—Become an advocate for health literacy by educating yourself. Several organizations offer training. You can find lots of information online, including a handbook from Pfizer. See the "Resources" section of this newsletter.
- **Earn Leadership Support**—No health literacy program can go far without leadership support. Prove the importance of health literacy with facts and figures. Highlight your audiences' reading levels. Underscore the financial costs of low health literacy. Point out that your group may be wasting money on materials that do not reach their intended audience. Explain that addressing health literacy can help your group fulfill its mission.
- **Make a Formal Announcement**—Your internal audiences will understand the importance of health literacy to your group if you make a formal announcement. You might also include health literacy in education plans, print guidelines and budgets.
- **Build Health Literacy into Conferences**—Many groups are making health literacy a part of their conferences. You can build the case to health advocates and providers by inviting experts on health literacy to run workshops.
- **Plan for the Long Haul**—Building the case for health literacy takes time and effort. Be prepared to communicate often about this issue. Because of personnel changes, think of building the case as an ongoing process, not an end point.

Resources

National Health Council
www.nationalhealthcouncil.org

AHEC Health Literacy Center
www.une.edu/hlit/

CHCS Health Literacy Resources
www.chcs.org/resource/hl.html

The Clear Language Group
www.clearlanguagegroup.com

Harvard Health Literacy Studies
www.hsph.harvard.edu/healthliteracy

Pfizer Clear Health Communication
www.pfizerhealthliteracy.com

The Plain Language Association International
www.plainlanguage.network.org

Specific resources and services mentioned in Health Literacy Toolbox are not necessarily endorsed by the National Health Council.

About This Newsletter

Health Literacy Toolbox tries to model several health literacy principles. We've sought to:

- use a conversational style with active voice and common words
- limit our content and explain our focus
- include lots of white space in the design
- provide "chunking" in the form of subheads and bullets.

Our hope is that readers will see firsthand the benefits of following clear communications guidelines. Materials can be attractive and compelling while adhering to health literacy principles. Plain language can convey information without seeming "dumbed down."

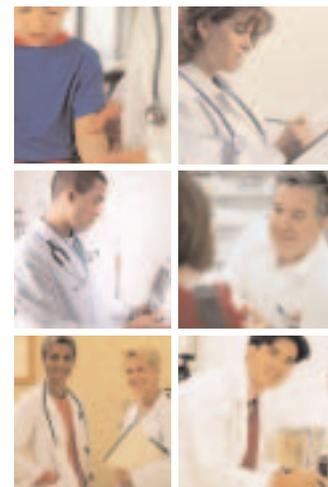
At the same time, we recognize that our audience is made up of skilled readers. So, we've broken a few rules. Easy-to-read materials might strive for a sixth-grade reading level. Here, we've aimed for a ninth-grade reading level. We've also used a smaller type size (11 point) than is recommended for low literacy readers (12 point or larger). These and other compromises are based on the central goal of any publication: to reach a target audience in the best way.

We Want Your Participation

In future issues of *Health Literacy Toolbox*, we would like to feature ideas from readers and health literacy experts. If you have a tip to share or a question to ask, please write to Marc Boutin at mboutin@nhcouncil.org.



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In the next *Health Literacy Toolbox*

- Program planning
- Tailoring outreach to target groups

Health Literacy Toolbox

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We welcome reader feedback and suggestions at:

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